



magazine

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BLAME

*Sophie Lowe
on the WA
thriller*



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John (Mark Leonard Winter) and friends at the river crossing.

Perfect Murder

Blame brings the tense, psychological thriller back to Australian screens. Sam Dallas caught up with the filmmakers that brought the movie to life.

IT WAS 1995 and 21-year-old Michael 'Hank' Henry was in his last year of Law at Victoria's Latrobe University.

Rather than taking notes during lectures, more often than not he found himself writing short films.

"I just didn't care," Henry says.

At the time, he was interested in American indie films, such as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and Kevin Smith's *Clerks*, both made on limited budgets.

"Then the lightbulb went off and I said: 'film is what I want to do'."

He finished law and then the following year enrolled in film at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) before graduating in 1998. He returned to the college and became the inaugural graduate of the Masters of Screenwriting program.

As a screenwriter he's not interested in comedy or horror. He writes screenplays that feel natural.

The Melbourne filmmaker was instantly grabbed when he first saw tense, psychological thrillers of the '70s such as *Straw Dogs* and *Deliverance*.

They are constantly engraved in his mind and he gets excited by the mood and tension these genres create.

This led to him starting work on a thriller of his own, a script titled *A Kind Of Hush*.

The idea for the film came from a 'Name and Shame' scandal in the UK, where newspapers published names of sexual criminals. As a result, innocent people with the same name were assaulted by vigilante groups and Henry felt he could take it up a step using this core concept.

It became *Blame* – the story of a

group of five young friends who aim to commit the perfect murder, seeking revenge for their friend's death.

Aligning himself with Michael Robinson, who was also at VCA, the pair worked on a story. Receiving development funds from Screen Australia and Film Victoria, Henry wrote a draft every year for eight years.

"The fourth draft was a failure completely so I had to almost go back to the third and start again," he laughs.

Having made almost a dozen short films, Henry knew from the outset that it would be his first feature and he had to write it with a limited budget in mind.

After a long and slow development, Robinson met fellow producer Melissa Kelly in 2008 at co-financing market 37 Degrees South (as part of the Melbourne International Film Festival).

"It was a serendipitous meeting that in the end was the key ingredient we needed to get it over the line," Robinson recalls.

Kelly, who intended to read the script and offer advice, fell in love with the project and was interested in developing it further, along with husband and co-producer Ryan Hodgson.

"I liked the storyline, I liked the way the script was economic and contained and was in one location, set in real time," she says.

"I just thought 'we would love to do this project with you' – and they were completely open to that because they were looking for a way forward."

Hodgson was impressed with how mindful Henry was of the constraints a first-time feature filmmaker would face.

"So when I first sat down and read this script – which was principally six

characters, one afternoon, no wardrobe changes, almost exclusively the same location and it was cleverly written – [I thought] 'well this guy has got a clue' – that's good," he says.

"Because we get a lot of scripts where they're wonderful scripts but they're so ambitious for first-time projects; so I straight up went 'this guy is clever'."

Experts in financing and getting the project up and running, Hodgson and Kelly – who, along with writer/director Henry and Robinson, were quite new to feature films – relied on several mentors for advice including director James Bogle (*In The Winter Dark*), producer David Lightfoot (*Wolf Creek*) and editor Jill Bilcock (*Moulin Rouge*) who provided post-production advice.

"So we were covered, I think, 360 degrees in our approach so that even if the film didn't meet with expectations of our funding bodies, we would still produce a film and it wouldn't fall flat," Kelly says.

Filming on a tight \$1.8 million budget was difficult, the creatives admit, however they knew what was involved going in.

"The challenge is to always ensure that you maximise bang for buck and create the most sophisticated film possible with the resources available," says Robinson. "We were able to stretch our budget with thorough and clever planning and by looking at challenges from every angle."

Blame is the first Australian film to shoot at 4.5K resolution on the Red One camera and the first to use Kodak Vision3 Digital Intermediate Film 5254/2254 to finish the film.



SOPHIE LOWE SHOOT CREDITS

Photographer: Alina Gozin'a

www.alinagozina.com.au

Producer: Mim Davis

Art Director: Alina Gozin'a

Stylist: Kitty Taube

Hair and Makeup: Debbie Muller

Makeup supplied by:

Cinema Secrets International

Post by: Dave Mercer

Sophie wears Max Mara, Carcoat Virgin

KODAK SAFETY FILM



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“The way we ran our onset data workflow through to our editor for example, meant that we could see our rushes in HD at the end of the day that they were shot, and the editor Meredith Watson Jeffrey could be assembling at the same time,” Robinson says.

Most of the early scenes are shot primarily with wide-angle lenses while longer lenses were used to create more of a claustrophobic feel, later in the film.

It’s this claustrophobic feel, created by cinematographer Torstein Dyrting ACS, that sets the mood.

The cast includes Sophie Lowe (*Beautiful Kate*), Damian de Montemas (*The Secret Life Of Us*), Kestie Morassi (*Wolf Creek*), Simon Stone (*The Eye of the Storm*), Mark Leonard Winter (*The Pacific*) and Ashley Zukerman (*Rush*).

Lowe, who received an AFI nomination for her performance in 2009’s *Beautiful Kate*, was interested in the Perth-based film as soon as she was asked.

“I really loved the role of Natalie – she really stood out to me because she’s not what she seems,” says Lowe, who celebrates her 21st birthday in June.

“She’s got more going on throughout the whole film, which is really exciting to play – she’s not just a regular character, it was something else I had to bring to it which I thought I’d love to do.”

Hodgson, Kelly, Henry and Robinson all believe Lowe, who hasn’t been to acting school, has that unmistakable “raw talent”.

“You can be sitting on set next to a camera and you’ll see Sophie ten feet away, then two days later you’ll watch the rushes on your laptop...and I don’t know, that quarter inch of glass at the front of the camera – the lens – just does something,” Hodgson says.

“There is a magic with Sophie and she just becomes this remarkably stunning presence onscreen.”

With few lines to speak, Lowe’s performance is characterised by nuances such as black-painted fingernails or a little twitch in her face. It’s the type of acting Lowe enjoys.

“I love doing stuff like that, I love making the audience a bit skeptical and trying to leave them hanging on stuff and do stuff more internally than just saying words,” she says, days after wrapping TV series *The Slap*.

Lowe is prone to playing the unconventional character; she says they’re more fun to do and more entertaining to watch.

The month-long shoot in February last year mostly took place in



Sophie Lowe in *Blame*.

Behind the Scenes

Budget: \$1.8 million

Investors: ScreenWest, MIFF, 3 Monkey Films, Factor 30 Films, Screen Australia

Camera: Red One

Camera equipment and lenses: Location Equipment, Dingbat Digital Solutions, ASAP

Digital Intermediate: Digital Pictures

Sound: Soundfirm

Sound edit and pre-mix facility: Curtin Productions

Title design: The Penguin Empire

Roleystone, WA – 30km southeast of Perth – during the capital’s hottest and driest summer on record. The hottest shoot day was a blistering 41.5 degrees.

“It meant that everyone put in 100 per cent every day because you cannot waste an hour – there’s no ‘we’ll do that another day’ because tomorrow it’s going to be just as hot, just as hard – it’s going to have exactly the same difficulties,” Kelly says.

It was a tight production timeline with the Melbourne International Film Festival requiring the 35mm print just four months after filming wrapped.

But Hodgson says the tough part is still ahead – getting an Aussie audience to watch an Aussie film.

“It is very difficult for an Australian film in the current market to find a way of finding an audience and I think once they find an audience they’ve got to live or die on their own merits,” he says.



Writer/director Michael Henry on the set of *Blame*.

“We want to make films that audiences respond to and we really hope that *Blame* in some small way finds an audience and has some level of success domestically because we worked really hard making a film that we thought people would want to go and see.”

This has been the case overseas, with the 3monkeyfilms/Factor 30 Films production having had a positive critical response at the Toronto International Film Festival last year.

“It’s definitely an Australian film but it’s not tied down to Australia which meant I wanted to create something that was more universal, that will play well all over the world,” Henry says.

Also striking a chord with international audiences is the film’s score, created by composer Tamil Rugeon.

Electing not to use electronic instrumentation, Rugeon instead used a string quartet and piano, shifting from classical to deep techno, further creating an emotional impact in the tense thriller.

Hodgson says the film may be a local revenge thriller (the first since last year’s *Red Hill*), but it is more complex than a typical genre project.

“The film becomes very much an essay on truth and the consequences of ill-considered actions,” Hodgson says.

“So it’s not the traditional revenge thriller as such; it becomes a much more intense psychological drama about truth and lies and how people respond when they find themselves in circumstances increasingly outside of their control.”

The film, distributed by Pack Screen’s Peter Castaldi, is likely to open initially on 10-15 screens. Through London-based High Point Films, it has sold to international territories including North America, the UK and France. **f**

Blame will open nationwide on June 16. Check out the IF website’s video content section for the trailer.